

Responses to Questions for the Record for Sonya Germann, Montana State Forester
Hearing: Air Quality Impacts of Wildfires: Mitigation and Management Strategies
(Sept 13, 2018)

Questions from The Honorable John Shimkus

- 1. What is necessary to increase the pace and scale of prescribed burning and other active forest management activities? More specifically what needs to happen at the Federal level vs State and local levels?**

The USDA Forest Service State & Private Forestry programs support essential investments in the health and management of our nation's forests. Any increase in federal appropriations to those programs will be critical in helping reduce hazardous fuel loads on private lands in and around the Wildland Urban Interface, reducing the risk of wildfire for communities. Additionally, the Landscape Scale Restoration (LSR) program is a key priority for State Foresters, allowing land managers to address national priorities identified in state Forest Action Plans. Codifying this program and funding it appropriately would allow state forestry agencies to tackle the nation's most pressing forest priorities in the most cost-effective, collaborative, and coordinated ways.

Increasing the implementation of authorities granted by Congress, such as the Good Neighbor Authority and categorical exclusions for wildfire resilience projects, will ensure that high priority areas are actively managed. The recent passage of the wildfire funding solution that will end the detrimental practice of fire borrowing will assist the Forest Service in utilizing these available tools. Montana, like other states, appreciates Congress' support for increasing the pace and scale of forest restoration and for the authorities that facilitate strong cooperation between the state and federal agencies. We would urge Congress to consider additional actions, such as the recommendations cited in the Western Governors' Association National Forest and Rangeland Management Initiative to carryout hazardous fuels reduction and support advancements in the use of prescribed fire. This initiative represents a multi-state, bipartisan collaborative perspective on promoting health and resilience of forests and rangelands in the West and highlights mechanisms to bring states, federal land managers, private landowners, and stakeholders together to discuss issues and opportunities in forest and rangeland restoration and management emphasizing investments in all lands/cross-boundary management opportunities.

Additionally, we would urge Congress to continue increasing its support of collaborative efforts on federal forest land management. In Montana, these groups have done the hard work of reaching agreement on intractable land management issues, and their continued engagement is critical to the success of increasing the pace and scale of forest management within the state.

- 2. Can you provide your perspective on whether more coordination among federal and state authorities is needed to make a meaningful difference in reducing the risks of catastrophic wildfires?**

Increased coordination is critical to successful forest management across shared boundaries. Thankfully this concept is widely recognized by federal and state land management agencies as a method to success in making meaningful differences across the landscape. Right now there is a unique opportunity for an all-hands, all-lands approach where federal, state, and local governments

as well as collaborative groups are all involved in the planning process as well as being on the front lines. Additionally, authorities such as the Good Neighbor Authority support opportunities to increase cross-boundary coordination between states and federal partners in order to accomplish more restoration work.

The recent initiative from the USDA Forest Service, “*Toward Shared Stewardship Across Landscapes: An Outcome Based Investment Strategy*,” also calls for increasing coordination. This strategy highlights the Forest Service’s vision of bringing the States together with the Agency and other partners to identify priority areas for increasing active forest management. Since the establishment of the Wildland Fire Leadership Council in 2002, there has been an ongoing effort by federal, state, local governments, and collaborative groups to increase coordination around the efforts to reduce the risk of catastrophic fire. *The National Cohesive Strategy* is an example of this improved coordination that continues today.

3. Should air quality considerations play a greater role in informing decisions related to wildfire suppression and forestry management planning, and if so, how so?

Air Quality considerations could serve a greater role in informing decisions related to wildfire suppression and forestry management planning. We cannot prevent wildfire, but we can influence the way that wildfire burns. We can also work to lessen the hazardous fuel loads on the ground through mechanical thinning and prescribed fire, which will mitigate the amount of smoke communities experience as a result of wildfire. The data shows that in Montana, over an 11-year period, air quality standards were surpassed 579 times due to wildfire, while air quality standards were surpassed only 4 times due to prescribed fire. In both the updating of the National Ambient Air Quality Standard (NAAQS) for PM 2.5 (81 CFR 164, pg. 58010) and the updating of the Exceptional Events Rule (81 CFR 191, pg. 68216), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) clearly documents the role of wildfire as an emissions source and the relevance of prescribed fire use and fuels management to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire. It is becoming increasingly evident through both research and experience that without prescribed fire and the relatively small amount of managed smoke that comes with it, we are perpetuating the conditions that generate catastrophic fires and resulting air quality issues, while simultaneously putting people and their communities at risk. NASF, my fellow State Foresters and I, are ready to work with members of the House Energy and Commerce Committee and staff, to examine possible legislative solutions to allow for more implementation of prescribed burns and mechanical thinning.